

# AN ANALYSIS OF THE PRIORITY NEEDS OF COOPERATIVE EXTENSION AT THE COUNTY LEVEL

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## Abstract

*Cooperative Extension's role as a relevant provider of nonformal education is dependent upon its ability to improve and adjust in response to internal and external pressures. Periodically conducting needs assessments focused on the Extension organization can aid in Extension's efforts to deliver quality educational programs by pinpointing priority areas in need of improvement. A qualitative analysis of the final reports from the University of Florida's IFAS Extension annual county program review process was conducted to identify challenges and threats facing county Extension offices. Common challenges were marketing deficits, loss of human capital, and technology barriers. Common threats were the economy, increased numbers of urban residents, and insufficient facilities. Developing and implementing strategic plans to resolve the needs identified in this study may increase the effectiveness and efficiency of Extension.*

## Introduction

Historically, certain issues have plagued Cooperative Extension's ability to deliver quality educational programs. Extension has struggled to establish a contemporary image that conveys the value of its work to stakeholders (Hammond, 2003; Hodson & Kotrlik, 2002; King, 1993; Telg, Irani, Hurst, & Kistler, 2007). The intensive demands on an Extension agent's time have long contributed to high rates of turnover and burnout (Ensle, 2005). Competition for public funding is a recurrent concern (Kalambokidis, 2004; McGrath, Conway, & Johnson, 2007; Seavers, Graham, & Conklin, 2007). Even 20 years ago, former President Reagan threatened to reduce funding for Extension (Smith, Barbosa, & Mayeske, 1990).

The impact of today's poor economic conditions is amplified by the growing loss of Extension's traditional political advocates—the farmers—as communities become increasingly urban (Murray, 2005). Not only is Extension's audience more diverse, but it seeks information through technologies that extend beyond the skill and comfort levels of many agents (Gregg &

Irani, 2004; Israel & Wilson, 2006). The combination of lingering issues and contemporary needs pressures Extension to make adjustments to retain its reputation as a relevant source of nonformal education for Americans.

In 2007, University of Florida IFAS Extension (UF/IFAS Extension) administrators worked with faculty and staff in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences to reinstitute an annual county needs assessment process termed "county program reviews." The purpose of the county program reviews was to assist counties with planning and delivering high-quality Cooperative Extension programs. Four counties were selected as pilot sites to test the new review process. The successful completion of those four reviews led to an expansion of the county reviews in 2008.

## Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Boyle (1981) defined needs as the gaps between what exists and what is desired. Citing Lewin's field theory of motivation as justification, Boyle argued that "any deviation from equilibrium - a need - prompts a tendency to return to equilibrium

by satisfying the need" (p. 144). People are motivated to implement behaviors which can resolve the state of disequilibrium that results from unresolved needs (Boyle). A challenge in program development is helping people and communities recognize their expressed and analyzed needs (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002), yet need recognition must be accomplished before people can be motivated toward action.

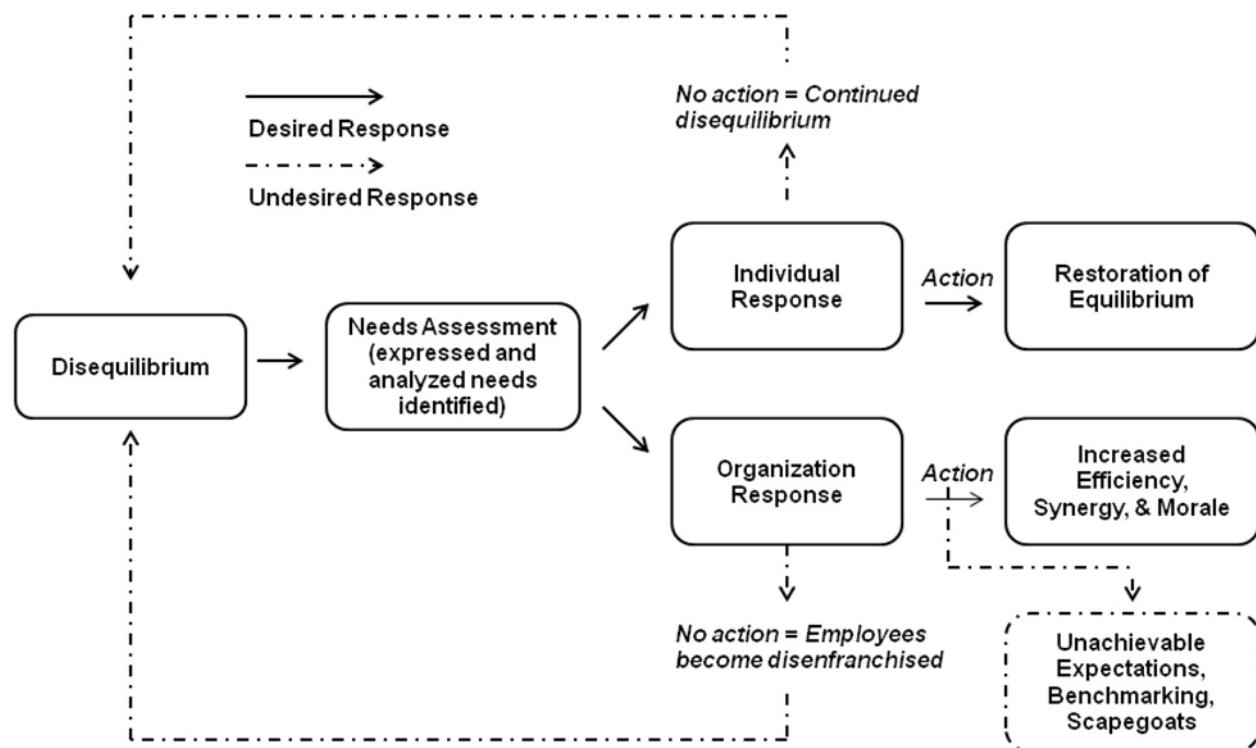
Needs assessments are conducted to "determine the needs of the people for whom the organization or system exists" (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995, p. 12). According to English and Kaufman (1975), a needs assessment is "a tool which formally harvests the gaps between current results (or outcomes, products) and required or desired results, places these gaps in priority, and selects those gaps (needs) of the highest priority for action" (p. 3). Conducting a needs assessment helps organizations identify desired outcomes so that plans may be developed to achieve those outcomes (Witkin & Altschuld).

McLean (2006) outlined the risks and benefits associated with conducting a needs assessment within an organization. Six risks were described: (a) employees believe that management will not take results seriously, (b) employees believe nothing will be done in response to the findings, (c) employee expectations will be raised to unachievable

levels, (d) management will benchmark low scores, (e) individuals will become scapegoats, and (f) management will not use the results for the good of the organization (McLean). These are serious risks that threaten the usefulness of a needs assessment.

The benefits of conducting an organizational needs assessment can outweigh the risks. Some of the more compelling benefits described by McLean (2006) included increased efficiency and motivation, greater synergy, and improved morale. The identification of needs can help an organization to prioritize the areas with the greatest potential for improving the organization, leading to improved efficiency and effectiveness (McLean). The actual process of a needs assessment can bring people together who would not otherwise interact. McLean suggested that linkages formed during the needs assessment process may continue beyond the needs assessment, creating greater synergy in the organization. Finally, employees may experience an increased sense of ownership in their organization and feel empowered as a result of having an opportunity to provide input. When input results in action, employee morale is boosted (McLean).

Figure 1 illustrates a model for understanding the needs resolution process at the individual and organizational levels.



*Figure 1.* A model for the needs resolution process.

Needs resolution is a multi-step process that begins with disequilibrium. A formal needs assessment identifies expressed and analyzed needs and provides recommendations for prioritizing and resolving those needs (English & Kaufman, 1975; Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). Acting to resolve needs at the individual level leads to restoration of equilibrium, whereas failure to do so causes continued disequilibrium (Boyle, 1981). Acting to resolve needs at the organizational level may lead to benefits such as increased efficiency, synergy, and morale but may also create unachievable expectations, unacceptably low benchmarks, and organizational scapegoats (McLean, 2006). The failure of an organization to take action causes employees to become disenfranchised with the needs assessment process (McLean).

The Cooperative Extension system has conducted needs assessments for many years. Extension conducts multilevel assessments as a representative of county, state, and national interests. The results of those assessments enable Extension to develop empirically based programs

reflective of community and organizational needs.

At the county level, published assessments are predominantly client-based, rather than assessments of Extension's county operations (e.g., Bauer, 1995; Fisher, Tribe, & Apsley, 2006). A recent county needs assessment in Connecticut guided the development of educational programs (Westa, Tyson, Broderick, & Stahl, 2007). With the information gathered, Extension educators were better prepared to develop programs that citizens wanted for land and natural resource use as they faced increasing urbanization (Westa et al.).

At the state level, published needs assessments have focused primarily on the professional development of extension agents and specialists. Examples of state-level needs assessments include the measurement of staff development needs of Extension field faculty (Waters & Haskell, 1989) and employee perceptions of system-wide planning (Havercamp, Christiansen, & Mitchell, 2003). Similarly focused needs assessments were conducted nationwide (e.g., Conklin, Hook, Kelbaugh, & Nieto,

2002; Gamon, Mohamed, & Trede, 1992; Harder & Wingenbach, 2008; Radhakrishna, 2001).

Warner and Christenson (1984) conducted a needs assessment of the national Cooperative Extension system. Their study examined (a) audiences that Extension represented nationally, (b) public perception, and (c) priority programming issues for the future. Though the vast majority of the surveyed population recognized Extension, only 45% of the respondents were familiar with any program besides 4-H (Warner & Christenson). The need to establish a clear identity for Cooperative Extension beyond 4-H was identified as a priority.

More recently, the Extension Committee on Policy (ECOP, 2007) published the results of a nationally-based needs assessment. The ECOP outlined the following organizational priorities: (a) increased flexibility and agility in identifying and serving diverse residents, (b) improved funding for Extension priorities, and (c) more rapid organizational change. Specific needs within the diversity category included offering programs relevant to urban and nontraditional clientele and the need to increase multi-cultural representation within Extension's workforce. The funding category included Federal formula funding needs and recommendations to develop sustainable funding models. Needs specific to organizational change included the diversification and improvement of delivery methods, planning for an anticipated wave of agent retirements, and the development of accountability and marketing plans. The resolution of the aforementioned needs is necessary for Extension to position itself as a leader who meets the educational demands of the 21st century (ECOP).

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to describe the challenges and threats affecting UF/IFAS Extension. County Extension offices were selected as the units of study because of their primary role in educational program delivery for communities in the state.

### Procedures

This study was conducted using a qualitative research design. The final reports ( $N = 8$ ) from the 2008 county program reviews were used as the primary sources of data. The reports were written by review teams for each county. Review teams consisted of four to five experienced state and county faculty from a broad range of program areas within UF/IFAS Extension and the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. Review teams interviewed county staff, faculty, stakeholders, and administrators over the course of 2 to 3 days. More time was needed to conduct interviews in larger counties. On the basis of the information gathered from the interviews, the review teams outlined each county's strengths, challenges (typically termed "weaknesses"), opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis; McLean, 2006) in the final reports.

Eight counties geographically dispersed across Florida's five Extension districts participated in the 2008 review process. Codes were assigned to the reports to protect the counties' identities.

The counties being reviewed were purposively selected by the Extension administration and ranged in size from 3 to 20 faculty and staff members. The communities being served included some of the smallest ( $\approx 16,000$  residents) and some of the largest counties ( $\approx 2.3$  million residents). The smallest counties typically provided programs in the traditional areas of 4-H and agriculture, whereas progressively larger counties included horticulture, family and consumer science, natural resources, nutrition, and sea grant programs. According to Merriam (1998), "using several sites, cases, situations, especially those that maximize diversity in the phenomenon of interest...will allow the results to be applied by readers to a greater range of other situations" (p. 212). The diverse representation of county size, constituency, and program areas was considered desirable for this study.

Prior to data analysis, steps were taken to increase the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The reports were reviewed (sometimes referred to as member

checking) by each county's Extension director to ensure the accuracy of the information. Lincoln and Guba described member checking as "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). The use of review teams to conduct interviews and develop reports resulted in the triangulation of data; that is, data which was confirmed by multiple investigators. Triangulation increases the trustworthiness of a study (Lincoln & Guba).

It is appropriate to report the researcher's bias when discussing the internal validity (or trustworthiness) of a qualitative study (Merriam, 1998). The lead researcher for this study was a county Extension agent and now is a state Extension specialist and an academic faculty member. The lead researcher currently serves as the director for the county program reviews and was the chairperson for one of the 2008 review teams. The co-researchers were doctoral research assistants in extension education. They had 19 years combined experience as county Extension agents.

The constant comparative method of data analysis was used to sort the data from the final reports into emergent themes or categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Merriam (1998) described the constant comparative method as the comparison of "one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences" (p. 18). Themes were initially identified by the lead researcher and subsequently revised and confirmed following input from supporting researchers.

Although the reports contained information regarding strengths, challenges, opportunities and threats, only data describing challenges and threats were analyzed for the purpose of this study because the primary focus of the county reviews is program improvement. Challenges were defined as internal weaknesses (McLean, 2006) that negatively affected the county Extension office's ability to conduct quality programming. Threats were defined as external factors (McLean) beyond the county Extension office's scope of control that negatively affected the office's ability to conduct quality programming.

## Findings

The findings are presented by primary category (challenge or threat) and the emergent themes derived from the eight final county review reports. Emergent themes have been italicized for emphasis.

### Challenges

A *marketing deficit* emerged as the most commonly cited challenge. Extension was referred to as the "best kept secret" in two reports (R1, R7). Members of programmatic advisory councils (e.g., Master Gardeners, 4-H leaders) reported having a lack of knowledge about the role of Extension beyond their personal area of interest (R1, R3). Stakeholders defined Extension as "a person, rather than an educational system" (R4). Stakeholders perceived Extension and Extension faculty differently from the university and its on-campus faculty (R1, R3). The failure to connect Extension with the university was reported as a threat to funding, in addition to being an internal challenge (R3).

Stakeholders believed Extension had an "antiquated" image (R3). According to Report 2, "Extension in this County still has the image among some residents and decision-makers as a unit that only addresses agriculture issues." Similarly, it was reported that "While [this] County currently offers a number of innovative programs, proactively shaping and reshaping a contemporary image of extension in the future will be important as county demographics continue to change" (R8). The image of Extension as an antiquated, agriculturally focused organization contributed to the emergence of the *marketing deficit* theme.

The second challenge theme was identified as *the loss of human capital*. One county was reported to feel pressure to "do more with less," especially with loss of faculty and staff positions caused by budget cuts (R1). Burnout, stress, and frustration were reported as side effects resulting from the "do more with less" philosophy (R1, R2, and R3). According to Report 8, personnel loss due to budget cuts and/or employee transitions created "a potential for a

noticeable negative impact of extension programs in the county.”

Past transitions increased the burden on remaining faculty and can create resentment between coworkers: “When open positions happen faculty do not want to ‘fill in’ because their ‘position descriptions’ were originally narrow in scope” (R1). The impact of future transitions because of retirements represented “a loss of institutional knowledge that will threaten the continuity of programming within the county unless pro-active efforts are made to increase the likelihood of smooth transitions to new staff and faculty” (R3). Uncertainty was observed as a consequence of vacant positions as continuing personnel attempted to develop plans for programming in an environment where community needs surpassed human capacity (R1, R8).

*Technology barriers* were identified as the third challenge. Conflicts between the county Extension office and the county information technology departments were noted in two reports (R1, R3). Agents and staff had difficulties accessing necessary software and Web sites needed for their jobs. For example, 4-H staff struggled to upload their annual Blue Ribbon report because of county firewall issues (R3). County Extension personnel were reported to need broader access to technology than non-Extension county staff due to the relationship with the university and the software needed to support that relationship (R3).

A lack of time to learn how to use new technology contributed to the *technology barriers* challenge. According to Report 2, “Utilizing new technology (internal/external) requires commitment and training time; the latter is hard to find given increased responsibilities.” A lack of commitment or training time resulted in failures to integrate a desirable amount of technology into programming (R2, R3, and R8).

Two additional challenges were identified in the analysis of the final reports. Though less commonly reported than the other challenges, *conducting needs assessments* at regular intervals (R7, R8) and a need to clarify focus and vision within available resources were noted (R8).

*A lack of documented program impacts and outcomes* emerged as the final challenge. Meaningful data to support accountability efforts was emphasized as a need, particularly when communicating the value of Extension to county commissioners and stakeholders (R7). As written in Report 8, “collecting meaningful data that describe the outcomes and impacts of past programs on clientele groups is an important challenge ... that must be successfully addressed.”

### *Threats*

The *economy* was a common theme perceived to threaten the success of county Extension programs. According to Report 8, “Uncertainties with state and local budgets pose a serious threat for educational programs for [this] county and other counties across the state.” Report 6 included the following observation: “deteriorating economic conditions [put] stresses on state and local budgets as well as local business/growers and consumers.” A lack of revenue at county and state levels contributed to poor budget scenarios for every county reviewed.

Three reports described how counties were responding to their projected or realized funding reductions by cutting travel budgets, which negatively affected the agents’ abilities to provide off-site programming, conduct field visits, and attend professional development activities (R3, R7, and R8). Even 4-H members were affected by budget cuts because of an anticipated lack of funds to support youth travel to activities outside of the county (e.g., 4-H camps and 4-H State Congress; R3, R5). The reduction of travel funds coincided with increased fuel and travel costs (R1).

The *increasing numbers of urban residents* was identified as a threat to Extension. Land use in many counties has shifted from agriculture to housing, decreasing “the numbers of allied agricultural industry personnel to collaborate with in program delivery” (R5). Residents of newly developed areas were described as increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity, race, primary language, and needs, as compared to traditionally English-speaking,

Caucasian, farm-based clientele (R1, R4, R5, R7, and R8). The increase in diverse residents was particularly true for the county that reported 67% of the population spoke Spanish as the primary language (R6). The growth in diversity placed additional pressure on county Extension programs because of lacking awareness of Cooperative Extension among nontraditional clientele (R7). According to Report 8, urbanization threatened Extension's funding because "expanding urban audiences do not have the history of advocacy on behalf of extension with the state Legislature or with county government."

The final threat to program quality was *insufficient facilities*. Six reports referenced several issues with facilities currently housing Extension faculty and staff (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, and R8). At least one county did not have enough offices for its entire faculty (R3). Lack of space for conducting large group programs (especially 4-H programs) was noted (R5, R8). Locating Extension offices in historic courthouses (R4), remote county locations (R3), unsafe urban areas (R1, R2), and temporary trailers (R8) was considered less than ideal. The threat to program quality because of *insufficient facilities* was summarized in Report 8: "In general, the physical facility is not the showcase it could be for extension programming and interaction with the public."

## Conclusions

The counties reviewed were affected by challenges resulting from marketing deficits, losses of human capital, and technology barriers. The issues with Extension's image were consistent with results from previous research (Hammond, 2003; Hodson & Kotrlik, 2002; King, 1993; Telg et al., 2007; Warner & Christenson, 1984), as was the observance of barriers preventing agents from using new technologies (Gregg & Irani, 2004). Two counties needed to improve their program planning efforts by conducting more frequent needs assessments. Similarly, a focus on program evaluation was needed to correct a lack of documented program impacts and outcomes in the same two counties. The challenges

identified in this study are representative of the challenges listed in the ECOP's (2007) report.

The poor economy negatively affected county Extension budgets, much as it has done in previous periods of financial downturn (McGrath et al., 2007; Seavers et al., 2007). An observed trend towards the urbanization of reviewed counties was a threat to continued public funding, based on a historical lack of advocacy upon Extension's behalf from nontraditional urban clientele. The threat to funding caused by urbanization is consistent with Murray's (2005) argument. The ECOP (2007) found that rising urban and nontraditional populations challenged Extension's relevancy. Finally, a lack of suitable facilities threatened Extension's ability to deliver quality educational programming.

## Recommendations

Boyle (1981) believed people are motivated to take action to resolve their needs and the disequilibrium associated with those needs. For this to happen, they must be made aware of their needs (Boone et al., 2002). Conducting county program reviews was the first step in increasing counties' awareness of their needs. Counties should conduct strategic planning sessions to address the needs identified in the reports. Stakeholders should be represented in the planning sessions, just as they were during the reviews. Including stakeholders may help counties extend the benefits of greater synergy and increased morale to the community, as predicted by McLean (2006).

Additional studies should be conducted to determine if the counties reviewed in 2008 made changes in their behavior based on their county program reviews. Preliminary results from the pilot counties in 2007 indicated counties had begun implementing changes (Benge & Harder, 2008). The plan to review counties on a rotational basis makes it possible to compare the final reports for a county longitudinally. Longitudinal comparisons will provide a means for determining the long-term outcomes resulting from the county program reviews and should be considered a priority for future research.

## Discussion/Implications

McLean (2006) theorized that conducting and acting upon a needs assessment would improve an organization's efficiency, create greater synergy among the employees, and increase overall morale provided action was taken by the organization based on the assessment's findings. To realize these benefits, UF/IFAS Extension must follow the advice of English and Kaufman (1975) by prioritizing the challenges and threats identified in this study. This study's authors advocate including the reviewed counties in discussions to determine their own priorities. For example, a focus on conducting program evaluations may be a top priority for the two counties with that need. However, the suggested priorities that follow are offered to facilitate discussion and were influenced by McLean's recommendation to first address needs with the greatest potential for improving the organization.

Loss of human capital is a priority for resolution. Extension has the ability to resolve needs created by the loss of human capital when those losses are due to voluntary transitions out of the system. One solution, long advocated by agents, is an expedited process for filling vacancies. A position should be posted as soon as an employee formally submits a letter of resignation to the organization. Anecdotal evidence indicates weeks and sometimes months passes between an employee announcing his/her resignation and when a new employee is hired. The long learning curve for first-time employees can compound the effects of any delay.

The costs of not filling positions quickly, as evidenced in the findings, are increased stress for employees left behind and a decreased ability to deliver quality educational programs. Burnout itself leads to additional turnover (Ensle, 2005). Interns could be used to ease the burden on the remaining staff until the county has returned to full capacity. Hiring interns would decrease programming disruptions. The costs of continuing the traditional hiring process are simply too high to bear when there are viable solutions available to resolve the issue.

The need to improve internal and external audiences' awareness of Extension is closely linked to the loss of human capital and, subsequently, is a priority. Advocacy and public support pressures county commissioners to prioritize vacant Extension positions when deciding on staffing (Murray, 2005). Although the assistance of a full-time marketing state Extension specialist would be ideal, educating community members about Extension's contemporary programming begins with small initiatives, such as educating Extension's own advisory councils about *all* program areas. The same clientele can be taught about Extension's linkage with the land grant university. These initiatives are low-cost but provide tremendous benefit to Extension by establishing a foundation of support that can be leveraged to address the loss of human capital.

The final priority offered for discussion is the need to address increasing numbers of urban residents. Unlike the previous two priorities, growth of the urban sector is beyond the control of Extension. Its response to that growth is not. Extension must reach out to nontraditional residents by offering innovative programs that meet their needs. Finding the time and capacity to learn the needs of a new audience will be challenging in counties experiencing a loss of human capital. However, it would be even more difficult to convince nontraditional residents to advocate for a program in which they are not vested. The future funding of Extension may very well depend upon its ability to communicate the public value of the organization (Kalambokidis, 2004). The short-term costs of marketing to new audiences will be offset by long-term gains.

The authors examined various and serious challenges and threats to UF/IFAS Extension. Certain challenges can be addressed directly; others, such as the economy, are beyond the realm of Extension. Regardless, Extension should commit to a course of action to resolve these needs so it will continue being the preeminent provider of nonformal education programs for Florida well into the future.

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